

The Humble Couching Stitch

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Subject: The humbly magnificent couching stitch from medieval times to present day, classified into distinct categories.

INTRODUCTION

Goldwork - one of the most beautiful techniques in hand embroidery - employs the humblest of stitches, the couching stitch. A stitch that theoretically is easily executed, but requires a steady hand and keen eye to be enjoyed at its highest precision. This paper provides a concise examination of the couching stitch as used in Europe from medieval times to present day. The various forms of couching stitches are reviewed with photographic support of both historic and modern examples. By the end of this paper it is the author's wish that the reader will better understand the sub-categories of underside couching, pattern couching, diaper patterns, or nué, Italian shading, damascening, vermicelli, and contemporary variations.

The couching stitch has been used for centuries to hold metal threads onto the surface of fabric. It's most basic use can be traced back to extant samples from the 1st century BC in the Scythian community (Clabburn, 1976). Tortora & Phyllis (2007) define it as "a method of embroidering in which a design is made by various threads or cords laid upon the surface of a material and secured by fine stitches drawn through the material and across the cord." Generally speaking, a single or double length of metal thread is laid upon the surface of the fabric, and is then held in place with a series of stitches which can be near invisible or highly visible, and regularly or irregularly spaced.



Photo Caption: couching stitches over silver passing thread using a grey 'self-coloured' thread and red cotton thread. Designed and stitched by Natalie Dupuis of Canada, 2019

Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2019

The couched thread can be made of any material, but it is traditionally made of metal. Since metal threads are fragile, expensive, and somewhat heavy, they are not usually placed in the eye of a needle and sewn through the fabric. This would strip the metal and also hide some of the metal on the reverse of the fabric. There are of course many exceptions to this which are beyond the scope of this paper. Dolby (1873) reminds us that we can find written reference to these couched threads as early as the 13th Century BC in the book of Exodus where it says "they did beat the gold into thin plates, and cut it into wires to work it in the blue, and in the purple, and in the scarlet, and in the fine linen, with cunning work." She also cites references to gold thread for embroidery made of pure solid metal from the decline of the Roman Empire, which would surely have had to be held in place with couching stitches if it was not woven into the fabric.

The working of metal threads in couched patterns is a clever way to glorify the shining and reflective quality of precious threads. Dolby (1873) has found that although many kinds of gold threads have been used in sacred and ancient needlework, the most commonly used thread for couching was what she calls passing thread. Zimmerman supports that thinking as well (2008a, *The Fascinating Medieval Embroidery Technique of Or Nué*). Polityka Bush (2013) tells us that it

“was called passing because it was intended to “pass over” (be laid on) the fabric’s surface and be couched in place.” Conversely, other researchers today state that passing thread was so named because it was intended to pass through the fabric. Passing is a widely used metal thread which is still available today for couching down. Japanese thread is also commonly used as a couching thread. The difference between the two is that Japanese thread has a fibre core wrapped with gold or silver leaf paper with no metal content as would be found in passing thread. Japanese thread has a much shinier surface than passing thread, which is very slightly textured. Passing thread is available in aluminium, copper, gold, silver and many other synthetic colour substitutes (Lemon, 2002).

TYPES OF COUCHING

Underside Couching

The introduction discussed couching stitches in general. Let us now explore underside couching (also known as *couché rentré*, *point couché* or, *retiré* (Clabburn, 1976)) from the Opus Anglicanum period in Europe from 1250-1350. This was a type of couching used on ecclesiastical embroidery for the flexibility it provided the wearer. Some of the most extraordinary designs from this period can be found in England, but Sicily, France, and Italy also employed this couching method. The couching thread used was extremely fine, and stitched on finely woven linen, silk or velvet with a backing fabric (Cole, 2019).

The silver-gilt or ‘gold’ background was normally laid vertically in Opus Anglicanum, in line with the warp of the materials, with the silk or metal thread of the figures, animals, etc. sometimes being laid horizontally to give a rich contrast....the couching thread was a strong linen of about the same thickness as the metal thread. To work this method the metal thread is laid on the background and the couching stitch is then taken over the gold and the needle returned through the same hole from which it emerged. Very little slack needs to be left in the metal thread, so that when the loop of linen thread is given a sharp pull, just enough of the metal thread comes through to form a minute loop which holds the couching thread firmly as it runs across the back of the work. This metal thread loop acted like a hinge on the Opus Anglicanum pieces, and the couching had a flexibility that made the copes move in a very beautiful manner compared with the stiffness of those with normal surface couching. Underside couching also made the work much more durable, as the couching threads, being hidden from wear and tear did not get destroyed with use. Designs worked in underside couching show up extremely well, as the surface is broken up with the shadow caused by the thread being pulled through to the back of the work (Lemon, 2002 p.111-112).

Underside couching is not seen in present day ecclesiastical embroidery, and rarely seen after the Opus Anglicanum period. Outstanding examples can be seen in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, or more practically on pages 14 and 15 of *English Medieval*

Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum (2016) a companion book to the exhibition of the same name at the Victoria & Albert museum in 2016 & 2017.

Since the exhibition, there has been a small renewed interest in the technique of underside couching and classes and kits with the technique can be found from embroiderers Helen McCook, Alison Cole, and Sarah Homfray.



Caption: modern stitched example of underside couching designed and stitched by Alison Cole of Australia, 2018

Photo credit: Alison Cole, 2018

Amusingly, Dryden (1911) goes to great lengths on pages 113-120 of her book to describe the execution of underside couching and simply calls it “the ancient method of couching” It would appear that she was unfamiliar with the term underside couching or chose not to use it.

For those looking to see extant examples of medieval underside couching, the 13thC Marnhull Orphrey (T.31-1936) is viewable in the Victoria and Albert Museum's permanent collection. Additionally, the museum archives are open to the public by free appointment at the Clothworkers Centre. Here you can view the Jesse Cope from the 1300's museum no.

175-1889 laid flat in a pull-out drawer. Images and descriptions of both of these items can be found on pages 171-175 and 180-181 in *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum* (2016). This author has had the chance to study both of these items in 2018 and 2019 and was in awe at the stitching and design. If a visit to the museum or access to the book is not possible, then detailed descriptions of both items can be found online through the Victoria & Albert Museum's *Search the Collections* tool.



Caption: Jesse Cope in storage at the Clothworkers Centre, archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Caption: Marnhull Orphrey on display in the Medieval and Renaissance public viewing galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum

Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Diaper Patterns

The origins of the word 'diaper' is not clear, but Strite-Kurz (2007) reports that it was used during the Shang Dynasty in China (1766 BCE - 1122 BCE) when silk merchants called their patterned woven silk fabrics *diapron*. "These fabrics apparently had a diamond [lozenge] pattern on them and used gold threads." Strite-Kurz, an expert on the subject reports that a diaper pattern will have visual diagonals in both directions. This is the defining difference from other couched patterns using the technique of pattern couching. Clabburn (1976) defines a

diaper pattern as “the small geometric pattern which can best be described as formed in staggered horizontal rows to give the distinguishing overall effect of diagonal lines.”



Caption: traditional diaper patterns stitched by Natalie Dupuis, 2018-2019

Photo credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2019

In 14th century England, it became common to use simple variations of the lozenge-diaper pattern with underside couching. By the 1430s, underside couching was abandoned largely due to its time-consuming nature and we see surface couching only. From then on we see “simple geometric patterns, created by varying the density of the couching stitches, juxtaposing closely stitched areas with areas of long floats to catch the light differently.....this method was probably imported from France, as it [was] already seen in French embroidery of the 14th century.” (Browne, Davies, Michael & Zoschg, 2016).

Very fine detailed photographic examples of this can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Middeleeuwse Borduurkunst uit de Nederlanden* from 2015 by Leeftang and Van Schooten (Medieval Embroidery in the Low Countries). This 272-page catalogue, published in Dutch, is an invaluable visual reference for anyone studying couching in medieval Europe, particularly Belgium and the Netherlands. An English reference book that also has good examples of diaper patterns is the aforementioned *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum* (2016), particularly pages 272-274 where the Fishmongers' Pall from the 1500s is described, and pages 226-228 where a great variety of diaper patterns are visible from the 1300s - some of which appear to have been pulled to the back in the underside couching fashion.

The author of this paper has had the good fortune to study diaper patterns in the archives and the public galleries of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Below you will see just a few examples of extant embroideries employing diaper patterning.



Caption: embroidered picture made in the Netherlands, 1600thC Museum No. 14.1971 in storage at the Clothworkers Centre. Diaper pattern over a thin single strand of silver on the jacket of a man

Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Caption: Cope for the Household of Henry VII from the 1400's. Located in the public galleries of the Victoria & Albert Museum, on loan from Stonyhurst College, Lancashire
 Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Caption: Torah Mantle, 1600thC made in the Netherlands. Museum No. 349-1870 in the public gallery of the Victoria & Albert Museum. This large piece has many different kinds of embroidery with some excellent examples of diaper patterns and regular couching.
Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Many of the different diaper patterns have been given names to describe them or at the very least have been grouped into categories. For example, an online course of Russian couching techniques with diaper patterns used groupings such as; diamonds, chevron, diamond lattice, berry and so on. One can look into Japanese Kogin embroidery (Briscoe, 2019) and Norwegian Smøyg embroidery (Stanton, 2018) for diaper patterns used in other cultures. Japanese Kogin diaper patterns all have a name to describe a particular design. Dolby, who was the embroideress to the Queen of England in the 18th century, shares her admiration for the diaper pattern: "We may copy the most elaborate of these stitch patterns with perfect ease; but it is a question if we could invent one of them, without an amount of thought which the necessity for rapid movement at the present day might altogether prevent" (1867).

Pattern Couching

Pattern couching uses a repeated pattern, such as: couching in diagonal lines in one direction only, couching in vertical lines stacked one on top of the other, convent stitch which places the couching stitch diagonal to the metal being couched, couching in a circle making a spoke pattern, and so on. Most reference books and articles combine pattern couching and diaper patterns into the same category but there is a slight distinction for those who care to know the difference between patterns with a vandyke or diamond pattern and those without.



Photo caption: pattern couching designed and stitched by Natalie Dupuis 2017-2019

Photo credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2019

OR NUÉ

Or nué, also known as Burgundian embroidery, shaded gold, nuance on gold, Netherlandish embroidery, Burgundian embroidery, *opus Florentinum*, shaded metal, *Lasurstickerei* (glaze embroidery referring to its overall visual effect in German) and so on, has its origins in 15th century Flemish ecclesiastical embroideries and was later adopted by several other European countries, in particular, Italy (Zimmerman, 1998, & Polityka Bush, 2013). It eclipsed the older styles from the 14th century, allowing the embroiderer to “handle coloured shading, in the most sophisticated way possible, allowing the shimmer of the gold to mingle with the colours in a way hitherto unknown. It also meant that the play of light on the gold was constant so that the problem of [a] fragmented image was solved, and embroiderers could carry out the intentions of the artist in creating the illusion of perspective” (Johnstone, 2002). It was brought to its peak of perfection in the creation of a complete set of vestments of three copes and two altar hangings (likely created in present day Brussels) commissioned by Philip the Good in the 1400s. It is believed that he had them created for his own personal chapel but then later donated them to

the Order of the Golden Fleece of which he was the founder (Johnstone, 2002). In the 1800s they were transferred to Austria where they now reside on public display in Vienna's Hofburg Palace. Zimmerman (2008a, *The Fascinating Medieval Embroidery Technique of Or Nué*) supposes that the embroiderers of these pieces were imitating effects they had seen on works from enamelists, illuminators, and painters. These artists and artisans used inks and paints on a foundation of gold-leaf on their papers and wood panels with the same sort of figurative, religious imagery.

"It is slow work, impossible to rush, so time-consuming that some pieces have required years to complete. Extreme expertise, patience, and discipline are mandatory. Executed with historically correct precious materials, it can be prohibitively expensive. Or nué is spectacular and perhaps the most breathtaking embroidery form of all time" (Polityka Bush, 2013). The design of an or nué piece is made stronger when the figurative image has "fine details, shadows and the illusion of depth...the more shading that is necessary, the more impact the finished piece of work will have on the viewer. This shaded metal thread technique is sometimes referred to as needle-painting" (Zimmerman, 2008b, *Or Nué Technique on Canvas*).

In this technique, rows of metal thread are laid across the entire foundation of the embroidery, and various colours of cotton or silk are couched over the metal threads one row at a time to create a figurative motif. Zimmerman (2008, *The Fascinating Medieval Embroidery Technique of Or Nué*) informs us that "In late medieval/early Renaissance or nué, the design is always figurative or narrative, almost always biblical figures and scenes from the New Testament ... no padding of any kind is used under the uncouched laid metal." If the design was completely done in or nué and the fabric would be obscured, then tightly woven linen would be used. But if or nué was only on a portion of the design then silk fabric would be used (Zimmerman, 1998). Sometimes the metal thread is completely covered with the couching stitches "creating a ribbed texture suggesting a woven fabric through which the gold glinted at occasional intervals" (Polityka Bush, 2013). Other times glints of gold are allowed to shine through with very pleasing effects. Imagine how this embroidery would glitter and wink at worshippers in a church lit with candles if a priest were to wear it.

The colored couching stitches were spaced to display more or less of the gold, shading and modeling, say, the folds of a garment in imitation of the painterly technique of chiaroscuro. Areas not couched with colored silk were couched with a color matching the laid threads to maximize the golden visual impact. All of these couching stitches, because they create special effects against the gold background, are sometimes called *gaufre*, a French word referring to embossed effects created by a hot iron (Polityka Bush, 2013).

Saint-Aubin, designer to the King of France in the 1700s says that:

There is no embroidery work where so complete a range of colour tones is called for. The embroiderer must always have twenty or so needles threaded (with the necessary

shades), so as not to become either overly impatient or lose the scheme of varying tones he wishes to give to his subject. Shaded gold is, no doubt, the slowest type of embroidery work to produce. It requires the most patience combined with the greatest skill on the part of the worker. (1770)

According to Beryl Dean (1968) the chosen ground fabric should have the design painted on so that the stitcher can follow the changing colours as the rows build up. Below is an example of or nué in progress. Dean created many works of or nué and was a driving force in the modern design movement of ecclesiastical embroidery. Her work *Head of Christ* from 1983 stands out as a signature piece of modern or nue, true to her design style.

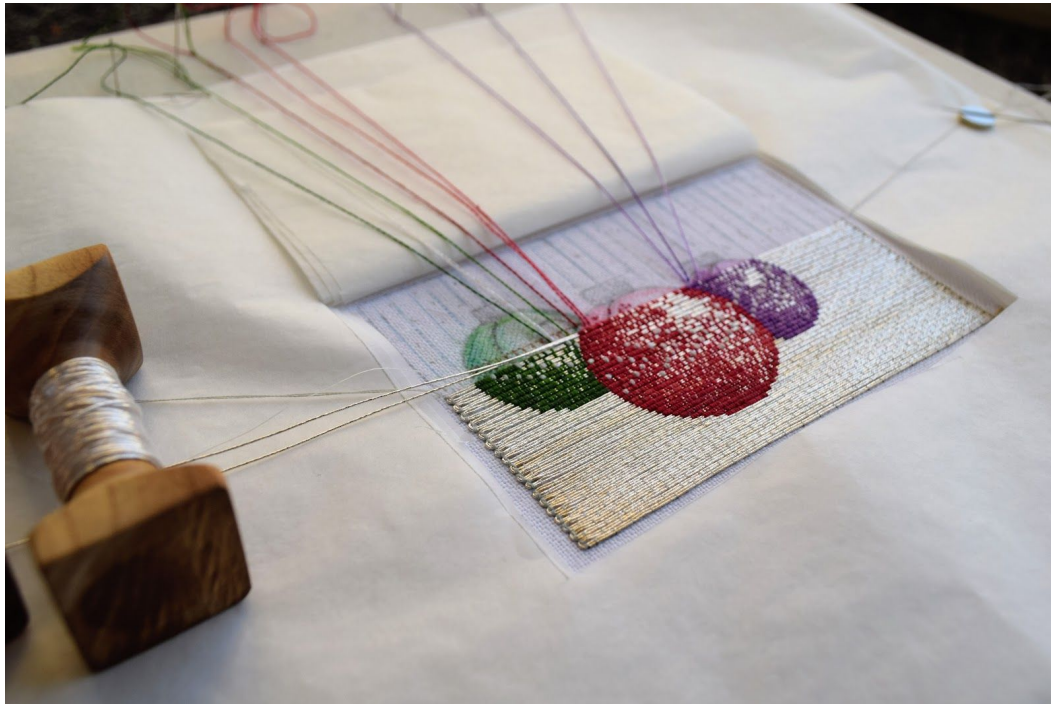


Photo Caption: Or nué in progress with design coloured onto background. Designed and stitched by Natalie Dupuis of Canada, 2019

Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2019

Some examples of completed or nué:

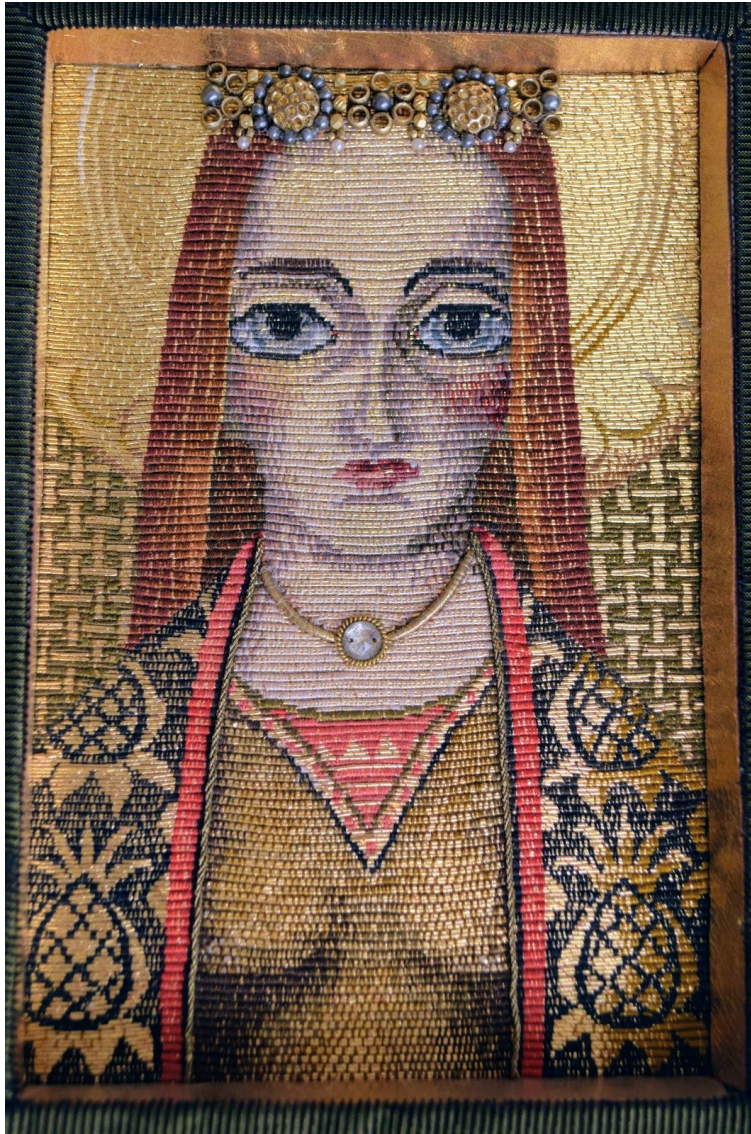


Photo Caption: *Queen of Heaven* designed and stitched by Beryl Dean of England and gifted to Elizabeth Elvin for her private collection, 1983

Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2018

The term or nué is often misused when discussing embroideries that have any sort of couching with coloured threads. Pattern couching, diaper patterns, and shading that is not figurative should not be labelled as or nué. Traditional or nué has straight vertical or horizontal lines of couched metal thread which produces a figurative image. All other types of couching have their own sub categories.

Confusingly enough, many goldwork reference books have used the term Italian shading when discussing or nué, or inversely call Italian shading or nué - see Erica Wilson's *Embroidery Book* (1973) page 197 as an example of this, as well as the *Or Nué* instruction booklet by the Goldwork Guild in the UK (Chapman, 2017). Rather, Italian shading is a couching technique similar in some ways to or nué but distinctly different as described further on.

For top quality images of or nué through the ages one can refer to the museum catalogues from the Cathedral of Pue-en-Velay in France *Le Trésor Brodé* (Cougard-Fruman & Fruman, 2010) and the aforementioned *Middeleeuwse Borduurkunst uit de Nederlanden* from 2015. This author has had the good fortune to study some noted or nué pieces at the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Royal School of Needlework in the U.K. as well as from the Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology in Berkeley, California.



Photo Caption: altar dossal from 1630s made in England. Museum number T.206-2009 in storage at the Clothworkers Centre for the Victoria & Albert Museum
Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

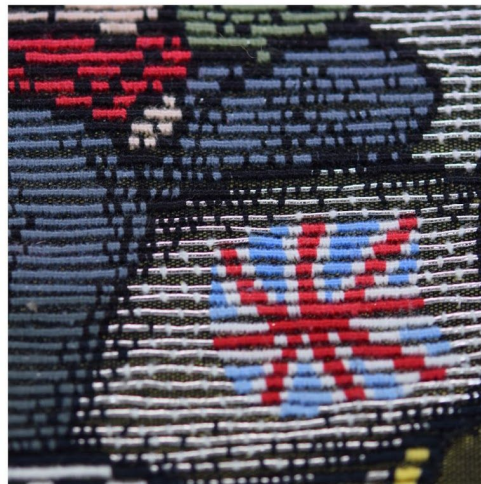


Photo Caption: from the archives of the Royal School of Needlework (RSN). Top photo: training school sampler, catalogue number RSN 96. Bottom photos: *Miss Briefing Time* by 2nd year degree student Charlotte Bailey, 2012 in the RSN archives
 Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2018



Photo Caption: Blackfriars Gallery at the Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology in Berkeley, California museum number LT006 *Dominican Dalmatic*
 Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2019

For the sheer amount of time and precision that this technique takes, one has to wonder why anyone would still practice it today. Margaret Nicholson was one of England's leading embroidery designers, examiners, as well as a curriculum writer and lecturer in charge of embroidery for the London College of Fashion in the latter part of the 20th century. She spoke at length on her experiences with or nué in two articles written in 1990 and 1995. In her retirement (the only time in her life that she felt she could dedicate time to personal embroidery research and goals) she took on the challenge of stitching in the rigid technique of or nué while using her own creativity. "If we could redirect the traditional use of this technique from the ecclesiastical to the secular, and at the same time encourage each individual embroiderer to bring their own interpretation to this work, I feel that the appearance of the work would be changed to complement modern life and give pleasure to a wider public" (1990). Furthermore, "with a little imagination we could add a new dimension to this flat method of embroidery for a

more secular use in our lives today. These new effects could easily be achieved by using more varied metal threads, thicker threads, surface stitchery, padding, the use of braid and applique, and the applications of sequins and beads” (Nicholson, 1995).

Nicholson (1995) goes on to say “in this machine age when everything has to be done quickly, is it not the duty of those of us with time to spare to keep alive the hand skills of the past?” (1990). Working the technique of or nué seems meditative and almost therapeutic for her in its repeated nature. Nicholson says “If I had been told years ago that I would work and be excited about such a tight and disciplined technique I could not have believed it possible. However, I cannot now imagine a day without the concentration necessary to carry out this work. It has also added the words ‘patience’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘accuracy’ to my own vocabulary” (1995). This author agrees with her fully and shares Nicholson’s sentiment when she said “after a lifetime’s work I would like the enthusiasm for or nué that has grown up in me to spill out and engender a similar feeling in other embroiderers” (1995).

In the latter part of the 20th century a coarser variation of the technique appeared in which needlepoint canvas and congress cloth was used. A double strand of metal thread straddles one row of the canvas and the stitcher uses the predefined holes to insert the needle. This method considerably assists - one would say forces - the keeping of straight couched lines which is one of the main challenges with traditional or nué. Good examples of this can be seen in *Needle Pointers* magazine with the design *Golden Elegance* by Carlene Harwick (2001), and also the designs of Jane Zimmerman seen in *Needle Pointers* in 1998.



Photo Caption: *Golden Elegance* Designed and Stitched by Carlene Harwick (1996)

Photo Credit: Mike McCormick - *Needle Pointers*, 2001

In this method three or four strands of silk or cotton are used compared to the single strand in the traditional method. In her article *Or Nué Technique on Canvas*, Zimmerman (2008b) says “working on canvas does not allow the subtlety of shading possible with traditional or nué in which spacing of the stitches has much flexibility and can be placed with random irregularity. With canvas you either use the canvas hole adjacent to the last stitch or you do not!” As an introduction to or nué, the use of an evenweave canvas is an excellent starting point.

There are many museums, churches, and art galleries around the world where one can find extant historical examples of or nué for further study or visual enjoyment. Designers in the 20 and 21st centuries such as Margaret Nicholson, Alison Cole, Anna Scott, Elizabeth Rogers, and Charlotte Bailey, to name a few, are other sources of modern motifs and usage of or nué.

Italian Shading

In a 2018 interview with the author, Elizabeth Elvin, former principal of the Royal School of Needlework, discussed Beryl Dean and Dean's influence on couching work. She confirmed that Dean coined the term 'Italian shading' to differentiate it from or nué. Elvin was asked where Dean came up with the term she replied: "or nué is a French term, so why not use Italian for shading.....it showed a very different type of goldwork." Elvin further said that Dean was an RSN graduate who liked precision. She wanted things to be called by their technical names and wanted to know the rules before bending them. (E. Elvin, personal communication, August, 2018).

Italian shading "follows the shape of the object as opposed to standard or nué which is worked in parallel lines (Kay-Williams & Elvin, 2016). You can see examples of this in a circular shape, wavy shape, or following the contours of motifs such as feathers or petals. There is a fine line between Italian shading and or nué seen in pieces that are worked in the round or in a wave, but otherwise following the parameters of or nué. Although quite popular in the last century, it is not common to see Italian shading on examples from Europe in the 14th century. However, Zimmerman (2008, *The Fascinating Medieval Embroidery Technique of Or Nué*), found extant examples in the Victoria & Albert museum from 15th century England. One has to wonder why the embroiderers of those 15th century pieces decided to stray from the standard at the time, which was couched horizontal lines.



Photo Caption: clockwise examples of Italian shading, *Lest We Forget Poppy* designed & stitched by Anna Scott (2016), *Colour Wheel* designed and stitched by Natalie Dupuis (2017), *Peace Crowns the Sylvan Shade* designed and stitched by Mary Martin (2016), *Coiled Floret* designed and stitched by Mary Martin (2015)

Photo Credits: clockwise, Anna Scott (2016), Inspirations Studios (2019), Mary Martin (2016), Mary Martin (2015)



Photo Caption: examples of Italian shading, RSN catalogue number 1791. *The Good Shepherd* stitched by the RSN in the early 20th century

Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2018

Ruth O'Leary (England), Marie-Renée Otis (Canada), Becky Hogg (England), Helen McCook (England), Sylvie Deschamps (France), Jo Dixie (New Zealand), and Alison Cole (Australia) are but a few designers of the 21st century exploring and experimenting with couching stitches and producing stunning examples of Italian shading.

Damascening

This method of couching uses single or double strands of thread couched in an open fashion of undulating tear-drop shaped loops leaving the ground fabric exposed whilst creating a pleasing filigree effect (Lemon, 2002). Vaughan Hayden Mackrille (1939) uses the spelling damancene

[sic] in her reference book when she says “the gold thread is laid down in scrolls” over the foundation layer.

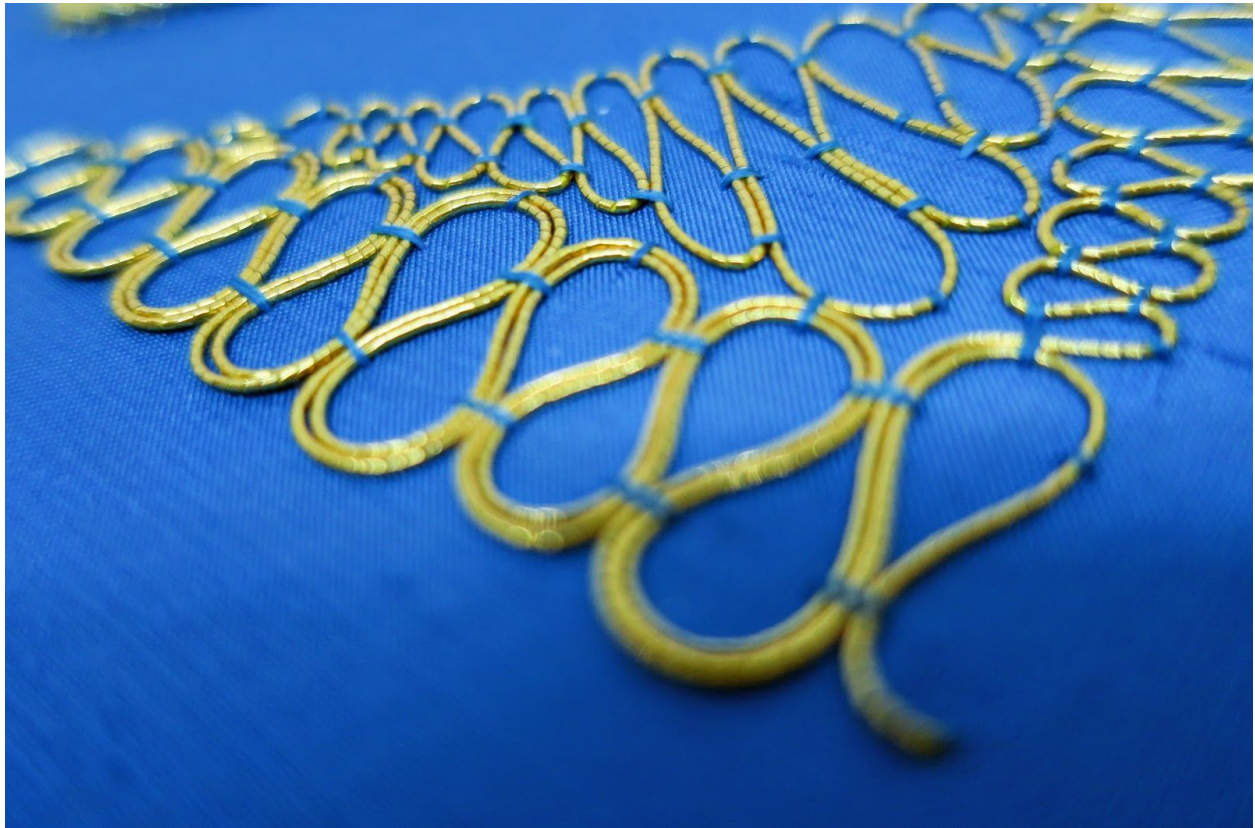


Photo Caption: example of damascening stitched by Sarah Rakestraw of England, 2017

Photo Credit: Sarah Rakestraw, 2017

In some reference books this term has been confused with vermicelli which has a more random, meandering loop configuration as described below.

Vermicelli

Similar to damascening, this is another type of open couching with a filigree effect but in this case the metal thread “meanders in a manner which gives an even, open-textured effect over the chosen area” (Lemon, 2002). Other descriptions such as continual random looping (Everett, 2011) give us an idea of what the executed stitch would look like. There is a delightfully detailed and varied 17thC embroidered picture with clever use of metal threads in the Victoria and Albert Museum archives at the Clothworkers Centre using vermicelli to great effect all over the ground to represent shaded dirt. Upon close inspection over two private study sessions, this author was able to see many tiny details that are not commonly used, all packed into one superb embroidery with many couching variations.



Photo Caption: Vermicelli example, 17th century embroidered picture made in the Netherlands
Tomyris - Queen of the Massagetae Receiving the Head of Cyrus museum no T. 14 - 1971
 Photo Credit: © Natalie Dupuis / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Vermicelli has also been called Cornelli couching, which Cole (2019) informs us is also used to describe the same pattern seen in cake decorating, and in reference to a type of sewing machine that can create this pattern with heavy cord.

Italian Couching

Dean (1968) and Zimmerman (1980) describe this couching method as leaving the chosen motif uncouched. The gold around the motif is couched so that the motif (which can not be too large) stands out as uncouched metal thread which gives a raised effect to the pattern. The pattern can be figurative or geometric, repeated or isolated. The effect can be compared to that produced by Assisi embroidery. Townend (1909) refers to the term Open Diaper pattern, or open Vandyke pattern to describe the diamond shape that is left uncouched over gold. One might argue that the shell pattern often referred to in antique books fits best into this category as well (Dolby, 1867 and Townend, 1909) rather than the diaper pattern section.

Couching in the Future

Some embroideries seem to defy couching classification such as the head of a Samurai done completely in 3-D by Elizabeth Rogers recalling the technique of or nué (Rogers, 2000). Contemporary textile artist Ruth O'Leary created a 3-D Welsh dragon in Italian shading which causes one to look twice (O'Leary, R., 2019, December 10, 2019). Retrieved from <http://www.rutholearytextileart.co.uk/content/dragon/>

Canadian artist Marie-Renée Otis uses the woven pattern of the damask fabric as the indicator for her coloured couching stitches. The face of a woman is clearly visible but requires the viewer to look again to make sense of the brocade pattern. Of her piece she says:

"I combined a piece of beautiful Italian fabric with my interest in spiritual female characters. I drew just the head and a long scarf floating in the wind. My goal was to use the or nué technique on that beautiful fabric without masking its floral design. I wanted to respect - even accentuate the floral design by covering the gold thread with a cotton thread as the same color as the fabric. In doing so, the spirit looks somewhat transparent. I have used a few shades of gold because the scarf is divided into a few subtle segments and I wanted to clearly separate those segments. It was time consuming as the gold thread is very fine as there was no reference to the weft and wrap on the fabric; I started with a drawn horizontal line and tried to be consistent in keeping the couched lines parallel all along. At the end of the stitching, I thought that something was missing to reinforce the storyline of this embroidery. When I added a few metallic beads from Denmark, that was it, you can make up a story, imagine that the spirit is saying something, either a murmur or a shout.



Photo Caption: *Murmures et Cris* designed and stitched by Marie-Renée Otis, (2010)

Photo Credit: Natalie Dupuis, 2019

CONCLUSION

Perhaps in the future we will see more of these interesting combinations of threads for couching, more three-dimensional couching -- one can only imagine what else. It is beyond the scope of this research paper to discuss every single couching technique or pattern previously used. As Townend reminds us, "the variety in the patterns that can be made by the stitches for securing and keeping the threads laid down in their places, is, one might almost say, endless" (1909). Heron, of the Dainty Work series (1911) wrote that "the possibilities of new patterns and combinations are almost numberless, and the earnest worker will not be satisfied with being a mere copyist, but will never willingly stop short of the creative point."

The author hopes that the reader comes away with an understanding that there are many ways to use the humble couching stitch, each with its own name, each creating its own special effect, with more to be invented in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Warmly,
Natalie Dupuis

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